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ABSTRACT

Developments in information technology have made online teacher training and development a practical proposition, but raise questions about the relationship between trainer and novice teacher at a distance. This case study of a pilot 10-week online course explores aspects of that relationship and considers future implications of this form of teacher training. This paper describes in detail an online teacher training certificate program offered at a British university for native and non-native English speakers anywhere in the world. Issues of course validity, assessment, suitability, and cultural sensitivity are examined. Wider issues concerning online teacher education are also considered. It is concluded that the technical and practical difficulties of face-to-face distance education are receding at a rapid rate. (Contains 17 references.) (KFT)

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COVER PAGE

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Developments in IT have made online teacher training and development a practical proposition, but raise questions about the relationship between trainer and novice-teacher at a distance. This case study of a pilot online course explores aspects of that relationship and considers future implications of this form of teacher training.

Introduction

This online teacher training certificate course is validated by Aston University, Birmingham, UK for use with native or non-native speakers anywhere in the world. During the course of the current paper, we will be touching on issues of course validity, assessment, suitability, cultural sensitivity and will also look at future developments and implications. Additionally, we will examine some of the wider issues surrounding online teacher education and discuss some of the findings of others in the field.

First of all, it is in order to look at the sort of candidates we might consider for an online teacher training certificate course. Consider these basic facts:

- Over 80% of current EFL/ESL teachers are non-native speakers of English
- This figure is undoubtedly likely to rise in the years ahead
- Many expatriates consider teaching as an alternative career
- There are very few opportunities for them to re-train while living abroad

To such people, an online course is an attractive proposition, but it has its limits. Despite the fact that computer literacy is increasing at an enormous rate, few educators would agree that interacting with a computer is as rewarding as attending a live class. A special kind of student - a professional adult, who is used to working independently, for example - may benefit most from this kind of tuition. Again, this is an area we shall return to later on.

Course Content and Validity

Aston University in the UK was one of the pioneers of Distance Learning in TESOL. Today, its Masters program is accepted worldwide and it also offers online or distance courses at the Advanced Certificate level. Because Paul had worked closely with the LSU (Language Studies Unit) at Aston for some years, we were delighted to have them underwrite and validate the online course.

Progress through the course typically takes ten weeks. There are ten modules, each of roughly one week's duration, although within limits, a student can proceed at his/her own pace. Following an online application, a student is checked for suitability. For example, does s/he have access to a computer with internet/email facilities and a CD-ROM? Is s/he a native speaker of English? If not, how has his/her English proficiency been tested thus far? Has s/he taken TOEFL or an UCLES examination and acquired an acceptable standard? It is not the intention to take on students who will find the course unnecessarily demanding. The main idea is that students will get a "taste" of TESOL in this way and thus want to go on as time passes. Another

reason for choosing Aston is that there is a clear future career path available online from this basic certificate through to a Ph.D.

Once enrolled, the online student takes a pre-course grammar awareness test. This again is diagnostic. It allows us to see where the gaps are - often quite big ones in the case of native speakers. From here, the weekly modules begin and are supplemented by regular tasks and assignments. The scope of the modules is quite large for a course of this type:

Modules Covered

Grammar awareness	Language levels
4 Skill areas	Range and register
Language classroom management	Language syllabuses
Questioning techniques	Coursebook evaluation
Morphology and syntax in English	Literature and drama
Presenting new language	ELT management

We could call these the "theoretical" modules. They are complemented by practical teaching modules. These include three assessed lessons in an approved language learning environment together with a detailed case study of one language learner.

At the end of each course unit, there is a required TASK. While this does not form part of the assessment structure, the task is an integral part of the student's progress on the course. S/he must email the completed task back to the online tutor, who marks it and checks that the student is on track and keeping up with any required

reading and/methodology. Tasks are emailed back to students swiftly to maintain close contact and regular feedback.

In terms of the course materials, these are mainly MS Word documents and PowerPoint Shows which can be easily emailed. Some students in the past have had only partial access to the internet, but relatively free access to email. The future of web-based instruction is examined later, particularly in view of intranet contact with multiple campus students at the Higher Colleges of Technology in the United Arab Emirates.

Course assessment is regular and continuous and there are three separate strands that must be passed:

Assignments - there are four written assignments. These must be emailed to the online tutor. There are strict deadlines for receipt and equally strict word limits on size. Each assignment is double marked and returned quickly to maximise feedback.

Practicum - there are three assessed lessons. These must be videotaped and the tape sent via the online tutor to Aston University. The lessons must take place in an approved language school environment, whose permission to allow video taping on the premises has been sought beforehand. The three lessons must conform to three distinct types and there must be an agreed minimum class size.

Case study - this is based on the observed behaviour of ONE student. His/her strengths and weaknesses as a language learner must be analysed. Suggested

remedies for problem areas are to be offered as well as suggested reasons for his/her difficulties.

Cultural Issues

Everyone involved in English language teaching must be aware of the cultural impact of the subject. Online, however, the issue becomes more complex. As a broad aim, this course teaches American English although it also tries to show some of the varieties of English currently in use. While it is true that language cannot exist outside a context, we are constantly aware of Pennycook's (1998) concerns of "linguistic imperialism." If the non-native teachers of English we train are, in addition to being agents of change, also agents of neo-colonialism or of Bill Gates, Macdonalds and Hollywood, we must be wary of the impact this has on local culture, traditions and language perception. This paper has been written in the United Arab Emirates, where over 80% of the population are expatriates. The minority locals, while accepting a variety of English styles as their second language, do not appear to be losing their own identity within it, but this cannot ever be taken for granted.

Practical and Theoretical Considerations of Online Learning

If the majority of our learners are adult, we should be using the term andragogy rather than pedagogy to describe our teaching methodology online (Pratt, 1993). The adult learner is perceived to be more self-directing and be more problem-centred in his/her orientation (Knowles, 1978). While this may be all to the good for the online educator there are two key areas of credibility to consider.

The first of these is academic credibility. According to Muirhead (2000) there is often a perceived doubt about the academic credibility of distance education. Similarly, he poses the loss of face-to-face contact with educators or peers as a serious personal credibility loss in many DL programs.

However, the success rate in programs where DL is a direct competitor of orthodox tuition can be significantly higher. Shaw and Polivina (1998) quoting Schutt (1997) describe how identical programs were taught in these two ways at a California campus. Those students who chose to take the online course, increased their grades by 20% over those of their face-to-face colleagues.

In any case, the technological difficulties of face-to-face distance education are receding at an enormous rate. Here at the HCT, all overseas interviews, except those at conferences such as TESOL are routinely carried out via ISDN videoconferencing. Last years, while running a Cambridge DELTA session, one of our students who normally drove a 300Km round trip to attend, was unable to make it in person and so logged on via videocon at one of our other campuses nearer her home. The price of personal computer video cameras is falling rapidly and the technology that allows streaming of video, with a concomitant saving of disk space and RAM is almost within reach of anyone with a reasonable computer.

Future Developments - WebCT and the HCT

WebCT virtual classrooms were licensed by the Higher Colleges over two years ago. In 1999, Paul designed the first faculty resource websites to employ this intranet technology and since that time, all English teaching faculty in a dozen campuses spread over seven Emirates can share ideas, can have asynchronous or synchronous chat and will shortly have access to streaming audio and video facilities too. The implications are significant.

To start with, over our local intranet, we will shortly be able to offer courses even in campuses where there are insufficient numbers of students. Two or three individuals in one campus will be able to link up with a full class in another. From September, 2000, the HCT launches a new B.Ed. in TEYL (the teaching of English to Young Learners) degree program in collaboration with the University of Melbourne. Already, there are plans to engage more directly with the Melbourne campus via internet and videocon facilities. In addition, in an environment which has not, as yet, done much to assist disabled students, the use of online learning to facilitate study from home is a further exciting possibility.

Our current TESOL online Cert. program seems modest when compared to these ambitious plans. However, it is always heartening to hear of educational technology being harnessed, welcomed and developed by language teachers. It would seem that the day of the language luddite is soon to be a thing of the past!

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